

# WHAT FOLKS ONCE GREW

More than just nostalgic relics, seed catalogs help trace agricultural history.

**A**mong the treasures housed in ARS' National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland, is a unique collection of more than 170,000 seed catalogs.

Dating as far back as the late 1700s, these nostalgic volumes describe thousands of trees, shrubs, bulbs, and other plants that farmers and gardeners of yesteryear bought from U.S. seed companies, nurseries, and growers. The collection includes catalogs from overseas firms as well.

In many catalogs, ads display farm and garden implements such as an "improved" horse-drawn lawnmower and special "horse boots" to keep the animal from "sinking in damp or soft ground." Other pages offer neatly boxed sets of "ladies and children's garden tools—useful, handy, and small."

Besides giving a tour of farming and gardening Americana, the catalogs serve as scholarly resources for botanists, historians, statisticians, landscape architects, and archaeologists, among others.

"The catalogs have been used to document when a particular plant or seed—such as a sunflower or melon—was first available for sale in America," says Susan H. Fugate, who is in charge of Special Collections at the National Agricultural Library.

"Specialists have searched the collection to find out more about the history of a nursery implement or gardening tool," she says.

"Some users have consulted the catalogs to trace the inadvertent sale of plants, like water hyacinth, that today we regard as weeds."

What's more, the catalogs "provide insight into early methods of cleaning, preserving, and shipping seeds," Fugate says. "Prices of plants and other items reveal economic conditions and regional variations of prices. We can also see trends in American landscape design."

The development of the suburban lawn, for instance, is reflected in new listings for home lawnmowers showing up around 1870. Other catalog entries show the introduction of chemical agents for insect and weed control, as well as the sale of biological control agents such as ladybugs.

"The collection was started in 1904 through the efforts of Percy L. Ricker, USDA's

first economic botanist," says Fugate. "One of the earliest major donations was from the librarian of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, William P. Rich, who donated several thousand catalogs covering the period 1845 to 1890. Hundreds of other catalogs came from attics and files of nursery companies and institutions such as the University of California and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden in New York City."

The oldest, most valuable catalogs include some printed on papers that contain much more acid than today's stocks. Now brown and brittle, these extremely fragile documents are kept in acid-free folders or pamphlet boxes specially made for archives.

In addition to these catalogs, the library's Special Collections staff safeguards—and helps people use—rare books, historic papers, correspondence, photographs, drawings, and other materials.

The National Agricultural Library is the world's largest agricultural research library.—By **Marcia Wood**, ARS.

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